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## Deaths along southern EU borders

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## **The relationship between EU border deaths and policy: an overview**

The research presented in this book investigates the phenomenon of border deaths – the deaths of people whose travel is not state-sanctioned (which irregularises their residence status), and for whom the act of crossing an international border is illegal. Irregularised travellers die on their way to major international borders and after crossing them as a result of their precarious status, but deaths are concentrated in physical border regions (Pickering and Cochrane 2012). Border deaths occur along several major fault lines between the Global North and Global South, as well as along borders surrounding conflicts. This research focuses on those deaths that have occurred along the southern external borders of the European Union (EU).

Before the 1990s, there were no regular reports of deaths along EU borders. Since 1990 there has not been a single year without. In the late 1990s, early 2000s, news of migrant shipwrecks, boat chases and collisions came predominantly from the Adriatic Sea where the Italian police were enforcing a shift in policy from welcoming Albanian and Kosovan refugees to preventing their mass arrival (Albahari 2006). In 2003-2004, the phenomenon of dead bodies washing up on the beach that had been concentrated in the Strait of Gibraltar for over a decade grew to encompass the length of the Andalusian coast. Around the same time, Lampedusa became the border spectacle of migrants intercepted at sea, both dead and alive (Cuttitta 2014). In 2005, thousands of people preparing to jump the fences of Ceuta and Melilla fascinated and horrified Spanish and international viewers, extending the spotlight of the “problem of illegal immigration” from the southern coasts of mainland Spain to these two autonomous cities enclaved on the northern coast of Morocco. In 2005-2007, European headlines asked what the EU was doing about the people who were dying and going missing along “its” sea border between West Africa and the Canary Islands. In 2010-2011, an increase in the number of people attempting to cross the Evros/Meric river marking the land border between Turkey and Greece

reignited the attention of Balkan and international civil society to this rural but heavily militarized border region that had previously been known for exhausted travellers wandering into unmarked fields of landmines. The Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy drew attention in 2011 during the Arab Spring, especially the well-known case of the “left-to-die” boat which was investigated by the Parliament of the Council of Europe as an example of the failures of multiple state actors to abide by their international obligations (Strik 2012). After the famous 3<sup>rd</sup> of October shipwreck in 2013 that led to a stately mass funeral, the European public were captivated by the struggle of Italian and Maltese Search and Rescue services to rescue thousands in distress at sea across the Strait of Sicily. More recently, in 2015-2016, international headlines exclaimed the tragedies unfolding in the Aegean Sea as boats of people departed the western coasts of Turkey for Greece. Meanwhile, border deaths continue in the Straits of Sicily and Gibraltar and in the Atlantic with no indication that the phenomenon will end.

The central question originally guiding the research presented in this book was: Has migrant mortality increased over the past 20 years as a consequence of changes in border policies? The main aim was therefore to analyse *quantitatively* whether border deaths are *historically* related to policy shifts. The initial research design envisioned the collection of data on deaths and arrivals (from which to calculate mortality rates over time) and the compilation of border policies at the EU level and their implementation at the Spanish, Italian, Maltese and Greek levels. However, the very first step of the research (collection of death data) threw up unexpected results that changed the course of the research altogether, although the overarching aim of quantitatively investigating whether border deaths are historically related to policy shifts remained intact. These developments are outlined in the following paragraphs which summarise each chapter of this PhD thesis and outline the connections between them and the central research question.

As explained in detail in Chapters 2 and 4, existing data on EU border deaths is highly problematic. In short, there is no official data and as a result, research and policy-making depend on news-sourced datasets created by civil society (and now also intergovernmental organisations) for campaign and awareness-raising purposes. The initial research proposal recognized the need for the creation of a more reliable database of deaths and proposed death registries as a viable alternative source to news reports on the basis of a pilot study undertaken a few years earlier.

Chapter 2, “*Deaths at the borders Database: evidence of deceased migrants’ bodies found along the southern external borders of the European Union*”, presents the reasons for, the methodology behind, the making of and the preliminary findings of the *Deaths at the Borders Database* ([www.borderdeaths.org](http://www.borderdeaths.org)). As the chapter describes, what was initially envisioned as a simple first step toward analysing trends in migrant mortality, became a monumental and significant project in its own right. Far more than a tally of the number of deaths per year, the *Deaths at the Borders Database* is a collection of official documental evidence concerning the individuals whose bodies were found in Spain, Gibraltar, Italy, Malta and Greece between 1990-2013. The process of collecting this evidence and compiling the database also produced considerable qualitative data from interviews with a wide range of actors involved in death

management along the southern external borders of the EU and from the observations of the field researchers who were searching death registry archives. As a result of the methodology of this ambitious data collection project and the challenges of unearthing documentary evidence of border deaths, the objective of this part of the research shifted from counting deaths (necessary to calculate migrant mortality) to witnessing and evidencing these deaths.

Chapter 2 also outlines two unexpected findings thrown up by the *Deaths at the Borders Database*. Firstly, two out of every three bodies recorded in the database remained unidentified, meaning that the individuals whose bodies they were, remain missing persons. This became the subject of tangential Chapter 3. Secondly, the number of individuals recorded in the database was much lower than we had expected to find, revealing that only a small proportion of bodies are retrieved; most people disappear. Moreover, the number of bodies found each year maps a very different trend than the number of deaths reported by news-sourced datasets (see Figure 2.4). This finding meant that the *Deaths at the Borders Database* could not provide the data needed to calculate reliable mortality rates as anticipated in the original research design. Instead, it provided a much needed second source of data to properly assess the reliability of news-sourced data, as presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3, “Challenging the anonymity of death by border sea: Who are boat migrants?”, uses the *Deaths at the Borders Database* and qualitative data from pilot studies to explore why identification rates are so low among persons who die border deaths along the southern EU external borders. The deceased are not the only people affected by the phenomenon. Families are deprived of the emotional and legal relief associated with knowing the circumstances and details of the death of their relatives. In addition, local – even national – forensic authorities are straining under the huge accumulation of unidentified bodies, a unique category of deceased persons with specific identification challenges. Differences in identification rates across countries and municipalities suggests that lack of know-how, networks and resources are obstacles to the identification of deceased irregularised travellers. Meanwhile, differences across groups and the labelling and procedural information for this particular group of unidentified deceased persons suggests that the biggest obstacle to identification may be lack of motivation. Whether this stems from compassion fatigue following decades of EU border deaths, or from the racialisation and dehumanisation of irregularised travellers and their dead bodies (Weber 2010; Basaran 2015), unfortunately falls outside the scope of this tangential chapter and, therefore, the research presented in this book.

The process of creating the *Deaths at the Borders Database* confirmed that existing data was even less reliable than initially suspected. In the meantime, the number of publications on the subject of EU border deaths had doubled since the shipwreck of October 2013 and drew dedicated media attention and funding opportunities for various interested actors, including researchers. Therefore, rather than producing another critical contribution grounded in problematic data, the project evolved into a reflective assessment of existing academic scholarship on the relationship between EU border deaths and policy.

Chapter 4, “Data on deaths of irregularised border-crossers along southern EU external borders”, presents a two-staged investigation into existing datasets: What sources of data are

used by academics to study EU border deaths? and How reliable is this data for studying trends over time? An exhaustive review of academic literature that seeks to explain the phenomenon, found that academic research – and, therefore, presumably policy-makers and civil society as well – is heavily dependent on news-sourced death data. Comparison of the *Deaths at the Borders Database* with the “List of Deaths” compiled by UNITED for Intercultural Action shows that news-sourced data both under-counts and over-counts deaths in irregular and unpredictable ways. While datasets such as UNITED’s List of Deaths, the Fortress Europe blog, The Migrant Files and IOM’s Missing Migrants Project are invaluable awareness raising and campaign tools and provide evidence of the phenomenon, that news-sourced death data cannot be used to calculate reliable mortality rates or assess trends in deaths over time. The chapter explores possibilities for estimating the number of deaths more accurately, but concludes that the limitations of existing data cannot be overcome by statistical analysis.

The research findings presented in Chapter 4 dramatically reduced the options available to quantitatively analyse the historical relationship between border deaths and policy. This provided an opportunity to further develop the aim of evaluating existing academic contributions to knowledge on EU border deaths. The aim was motivated by a desire to contribute something new to a debate that seemed to be stuck in a loop (see Chapter 5) while people continued to die crossing the southern EU external borders.

The in-depth study of academic literature introduced in Chapter 4 revealed much more than the homogenous sources of data used to study EU border deaths. Chapter 5, “Hypotheses of the relationship between EU border deaths and policy: policy-makers vs scholars” presents the main findings that, although no common understanding emerges from the literature of what *kind* of relationship exists between deaths and policy (e.g. causal, reciprocal, structural), a relationship is consistently presumed to exist, and there are two hypotheses about how the relationship works that are common to almost all academic contributions to this field:

Academic Hypothesis 1: Border deaths occur because migration policies irregularise travel for certain people.

Academic Hypothesis 2: Border deaths increase because border control endangers irregularised travellers.

These hypotheses prompt policy solutions that are contrary to current policy-making. A review of EU policy preambles, reveals two very different hypotheses about how EU border deaths are related to policy that justify policy responses to border deaths.

Policy Hypothesis 1: Border deaths occur because people migrate without authorisation.

Policy Hypothesis 2: Border deaths increase because smugglers and migrants take more dangerous risks.

Despite these contrasting hypotheses, the presumption of a relationship between deaths and policy is unchallenged. But policies continue to seek to prevent illegal immigration and combat smuggling networks. Chapter 4 leads to the conclusion that there is insufficient death data to

test which set of hypotheses is a better fit. However, the *Deaths at the Borders Database* provides official evidence that there have been deaths every single year since the emergence of the southern EU external borders, and all existing datasets suggest an increase in deaths in the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to the 1990s, as border control has intensified. While non-conclusive, this evidence undermines the hypotheses underpinning EU policy-making and supports the alternative hypotheses of how EU border deaths are related to policy common among academics (almost unanimously).

In sum, this research began as a quantitative project geared toward examining the hypothesis that over the last two decades policy shifts had resulted in an increase in EU border deaths. During the process of creating the *Deaths at the Borders Database* (Chapter 2) the research revealed a new topic (Chapter 3) and irresolvable data issues (Chapter 4), which led to an evaluation of academic and policy-makers' understandings of the relationship between EU border deaths and policy (Chapter 5). The answer to the original question whether EU border deaths are historically related to policy shifts is that there is a relation, but there is no quantitative resolution to the debate about how to bring an end to EU border deaths.

In addition, this research makes several contributions to debates about irregular migration and the EU. Due to the temporal and geographical scale of the research, these contributions serve to broaden the perspectives that usually factor into such debates.

First, a historical context. Debates about immigration to the EU and border control are fixated on the latest numbers, the latest policy documents, the latest refugee crisis and the latest shifts in European politics. Headlines report the deadliest months, financial quarters or years, and exclaim the unprecedented nature of recent developments. But the fatal crossings and shipwrecks of the last few years are not unprecedented; EU border deaths have been happening for three decades. As demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, Syrian refugees are simply the latest group of people to be exposed to the risk of border death along the southern external borders of the EU. By studying longitudinal data from 1990-2013, this research has produced significant insights into the historical lead up to recent developments.

Second, a geographical perspective. EU border deaths do not only occur between Greece and Turkey or between Libya and Italy, but along the length of the external borders of the EU's Area of Freedom and Security. Although the scale of crossings and deaths in Greece and Italy have drawn attention to these parts of the EU external border in recent years, deaths continue to happen in other regions too, such as between West Africa and the Canary Islands, between Morocco and Spain and in the Adriatic Sea. Border deaths are not unique to the EU external borders. On a global scale, border deaths occur along national borders that designate fault lines between the Global North and Global South, fault lines that delineate – among other things – regions where people have powerful passports from regions where people have weak passports (see Figure 1.1). This research sought to present a comprehensive perspective on the southern external borders important for debates in the EU on irregular migration, and so limited its empirical contributions to this region.

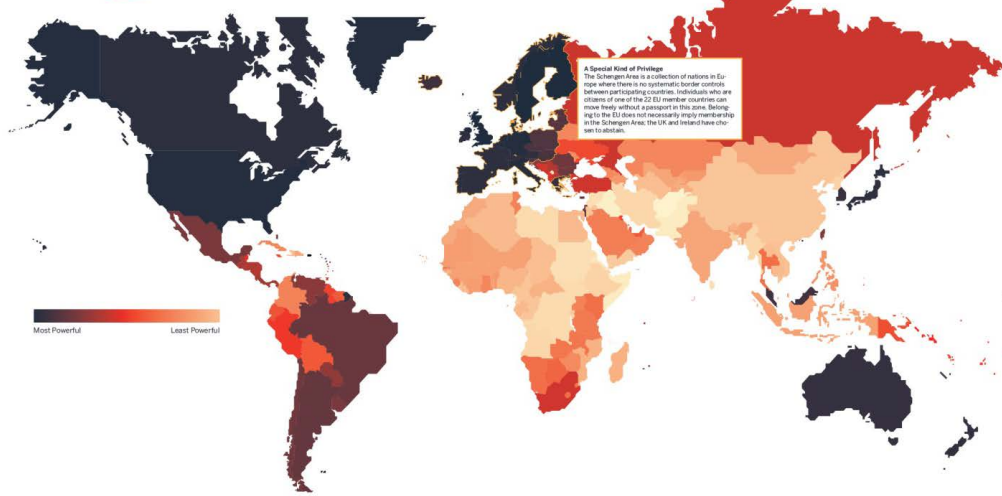


## HOW POWERFUL IS YOUR PASSPORT?

We may live in a world defined by invisible meta-data and the Cloud, but the roughly 345 inch paper booklet known as the passport still carries a lot of weight. More than a simple grant of access into a country, passports and the visas they contain are a reflection of geopolitics, the relationship between two nations, and a country's stature relative to the rest of the world. They're also of immense value. Just ask any one of the

developing world's citizens if they'd rather win the lottery or a U.S. passport; chances are they'd say the latter (though they'd be wrong in thinking the American passport is the most powerful of them all).

Here's a look at the strength of the world's passports—ranked by the travel freedom a passport holder enjoys.



Passport holders of the following countries are granted visa-free access (or receive a visa upon arrival) to the number of countries noted.

173 Finland	163 Maldives	141 Bulgaria	114 Guatemala	84 Solomon Islands	71 Qatar	59 Moldova	49 Tajikistan	41 Equatorial Guinea
Sweden	Malta	Chile	Honduras	81 Samoa	Botswana	Philippines	Shant	Guinea
United Kingdom	159 Liechtenstein	Romania	113 El Salvador	Tuvalu	69 Bahrain	58 Cape Verde	Central African Republic	Bangladesh
172 Denmark	157 Hungary	137 Bahamas	109 Nicaragua	80 Maldives	68 Gambia	56 Azerbaijan	Madagascar	Burundi
Germany	155 Czech Republic	Barbados	104 Serbia	Peru	Kenya	54 Armenia	Mozambique	Ethiopia
Luxembourg	Slovakia	132 Mexico	103 Uruguay	Tonga	Namibia	53 Burkina Faso	47 Guinea-Bissau	North Korea
U.S.A.	Slovenia	131 St. Kitts and Nevis	100 Trinidad and Tobago	79 Vanuatu	67 Malawi	Niger	Nigeria	40 Angola
171 Belgium	153 Poland	130 Antigua and Barbuda	98 Montenegro	78 Fiji	66 Swaziland	Egypt	Timor-Leste	Djibouti
Italy	152 Estonia	Chinese Taipei	95 Russian Federation	Guyana	Zambia	65 Tanzania	46 Algeria	Iran
Netherlands	Hong Kong	Yelken City	94 South Africa	Kiribati	64 Saudi Arabia	63 Colombia	Cambodia	39 Congo
170 Canada	Latvia	129 Croatia	92 St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Nauru	62 Mauritania	62 Dominican Republic	Gabon	Libya
France	151 Cyprus	128 Venezuela	91 Bosnia and Herzegovina	77 Jamaica	61 Indonesia	61 Mongolia	45 Chad	South Sudan
Ireland	Lithuania	127 Seychelles	88 Albania	Kuwait	Mali	60 Georgia	Haiti	Syria
168 Austria	149 San Marino	124 Paraguay	87 Belize	Marshall Islands	Niger	50 Sao Tome and Principe	44 Vietnam	38 Kosovo
New Zealand	148 Monaco	123 Mauritius	Dominica	Ukraine	Togo	52 Comoros	43 Cameroon	Latvian
Switzerland	147 Andorra	122 Costa Rica		76 Papua New Guinea	51 Jordan	42 Yemen	China	Sri Lanka
167 Australia	Argentina	121 Panama		74 Ecuador	50 Iraq	37 Nepal	India	Sudan
Greece	146 Brazil	118 Macao		73 Bolivia	42 Comoros	36 Eritrea	Uzbekistan	32 Pakistan
Singapore	Brunei			72 Palau	41 Equatorial Guinea	35 Somalia	Uganda	Somalia
166 South Korea	144 Israel			71 Qatar	40 Angola	34 Iran	40 Georgia	31 Iraq
165 Iceland				70 Botswana	39 Congo	28 Afghanistan	39 Congo	

**Figure 1.1 Map showing the relative travel freedom of national passports based on visa requirements for entry into other states. Designed by Ricky Linn for GOOD Magazine. (Source: <https://www.good.is/infographics/how-powerful-is-your-passport>).**

Third, this research presents new insights from the first exhaustive study of academic literature on EU border deaths and the relationship with the migration and border regime. The phenomenon of EU border deaths first appeared in academic scholarship in the early 2000s, introduced by sociologists and lawyers concerned with race relations, peace studies and human rights. Over the last decade, as public interest in the situation has increased, literature on EU border deaths has grown substantially, and diversified in terms of disciplinary, methodological and theoretical approaches. Yet, of concern to scholars working in this field, the literature is predominantly grounded in desk-based research and dependent on news-sourced data. Nonetheless, despite the disparate nature of research in this small but expanding field, two clear ideas about how deaths and policy are related are common to almost all literature on the subject.

These ideas conflict with those that apparently underpin migration and border policy-making, and indicate completely different policy solutions than those that have been pursued until now. Policy-makers should be aware of this convergence in academia and take it seriously given that these ideas undermine the current approach to preventing further loss of life at the external borders.

Fourth, a reminder of the individuals concerned. *The Deaths at the Borders Database* is the first dataset to record people who have died attempting to enter the EU individually, rather than incidentally. This perspective exposed new insights, such as the low rate of identification of deceased irregularised travellers, the racialisation of death management, and the challenges of tracing people from the incident in which they died to their burial place (Chapters 2 and 3). Deciding to compile individual death records changed the nature of the research, from data collection to evidence collection, from counting to witnessing. Individual death records more effectively convey the loss of *life* from border deaths, reminding us that the people directly harmed are irregularised travellers. Their deaths affect the psychological and physical well-being of a second round of individuals: their families and friends, and witnesses (survivors, rescuers, death management officials, local residents). Other important research is contributing to our knowledge of the perspective of family and friends of deceased or disappeared irregularised travellers (e.g. Zagaria, Kovras and Robins).

Meanwhile, searching archives of 563 municipalities along the southern EU external border, conducting interviews with over 70 officials and local residents from these communities, and becoming, myself, a witness as a researcher of border deaths, revealed severe secondary psychological and physical damage from border deaths. Despite widespread awareness of shipwrecks and the dangers of irregularised travel, debates on irregular migration and border control do not demonstrate full awareness of the loss of life and damage associated with border death.

By focusing on individual loss at a regional scale over a 24-year period, this research contributes a comprehensive overview of EU border deaths that can help prevent these deaths – a general objective EU policy-makers adopted over a decade ago.